

**BUILDING LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS
AND PARTNERSHIPS
WITH CLIENT COMMUNITIES**

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In 1975 a small number of Cambodian refugees, primarily highly educated navy officers and their families, were resettled in Minnesota. In 1979 increasing numbers of Cambodians began to arrive. This second group included many victims of the killing fields who had experienced torture or violence and who were suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. When these new refugees arrived in the Twin Cities, they found a support system that was ill-equipped to provide services to their community.

In 1981 the Cambodia refugee community organized a Buddhist temple. Although it was primarily a religious organization, the temple began to provide services such as survival skills training, employment services and crisis management. In June 1989 the board of the temple voted to discontinue the provision of social services and to transfer these services to a new mutual assistance association, the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota (UCAM).

One of the first tasks of this new organization was to contact Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS) about developing a partnership that would provide legal services to the 8,000 Cambodian refugees and immigrants who were living in Minnesota. The project was necessary because of the special needs of the community. Hundred of thousands of Cambodians were still living in refugees camps in Thailand and many of these refugees had close relatives in Minnesota. In late 1988 the United States Department of State had announced a special resettlement program for the Cambodian refugees, but it was complex and legal assistance was frequently required. Sponsoring family members needed help in becoming citizens, finding jobs so they could support their immigrant relatives, and in finding their way through the maze of documents that were required by the Immigration and Naturalization

Service. From this need, the partnership between the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota and Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services developed.

Initially, UCAM submitted grant requests to major foundations and was able to secure full funding of the project for three years. The project was housed at the offices of UCAM, but the staff were employees of SMRLS. The UCAM executive director participated in the hiring of an attorney, two paralegals and a secretary. The paralegals and secretary were members of the Cambodian community. Neither of the paralegals had any legal training but both were trained as social workers and had a good understanding of the needs of the community. A committee of ten community members served as an advisory board and a community member joined the board of SMRLS.

In Minnesota, there have been many attempts to start legal services projects that are housed in community-based organizations and that provide direct services to low-income refugees and immigrants. However, none, other than the UCAM/SMRLS collaboration, has survived. Why is this project different and why does it work so well?

One of the most important reasons for the success of the project has been the composition of the staff. With three of the four staff members being members of the Cambodian community, it was easy to do outreach and notify the community of the availability of services. All of the Cambodian staff members had family members in the refugee camps and could easily identify with the problems facing their clients. The bilingual/bicultural staff members understood what strategies worked with the community, what tactics needed to be avoided, and how to approach and gain the support of community leaders.

A second factor in the success of this project is that the four original staff members are still with the project. They are well known and respected in the community and are trusted by the clients they serve. This is especially important in serving this particular group of clients who under the Khmer Rouge communist government had been taught not to trust anyone, even family members.

Many of the refugee and immigrant clients seeking legal assistance have a variety of problems. Some need to find jobs, others have conflicts with their children, and elders are frequently isolated and homebound. By sharing office space with UCAM, the legal staff has been able to make referrals to social workers who are available at the same location. In turn, as the UCAM social workers encounter clients with legal problems, referrals can be made to the legal project. Elders and clients with limited English especially benefit from having all services concentrated in one location.

Cambodian refugees and immigrants come from a country where the decisions in court cases are often decided in favor of the person with the most money. Upon arrival in the United States, refugees were extremely grateful for the opportunity to live in the U.S. and hesitated to pursue their legal rights. People were willing to let landlords keep damage deposits rather than filing a claim in conciliation court or failed to file appeals simply because of fear of the legal system. To combat this problem, community education is a priority of the project. Staff at UCAM frequently arrange meetings with parents, elders and youth. The legal staff attend these meetings on a regular basis and provide information about the legal system and changes in the law that will affect the community. These presentations are given in the Cambodian language which ensures that the community members thoroughly understand the issues involved. As the

Cambodians began to understand how the American legal system worked, they became more willing to pursue legal remedies and to assert their rights.

Although the project is located away from the central office of SMRLS, a referral system has been developed which ensures that clients are able to access the services they need. When a client has a problem with housing, family law or public benefits, the project staff complete the intake process and call the central office to schedule an appointment. Clients with limited English are thus able to avoid an intimidating phone screening process. A paralegal accompanies the client to his meetings with the attorney and is available to provide translation services until the case is completed.

One of the major reasons for the success of this partnership has been that the roles of each of the parties has been clearly defined and each party has worked hard to make the project successful. There is no competition between the partners for recognition. The partners worked together to develop and implement the project, to secure funding, and to provide services to the Cambodian community. However, UCAM understands that it is not their role to be involved in the decisions made that affect individual cases. Recently the project staff have begun to work with another community based organization to implement a similar project. The members of the organization have developed the idea for a project and are in the process of securing foundation support. The development of the partnership has been extremely difficult because this new organization is unwilling to let go of the control of the legal work. The leaders of the organization initially wanted to supervise the legal work, including preparing applications, screening cases for legal issues, and maintaining control of the files. After numerous meetings, it appears that the community organization is beginning to understand their boundaries and the

limitations on their provision of direct legal services. Unfortunately, the project has taken many months to get off the ground due to differing understandings of the roles of each partner.

The UCAM management team has played an important role in making the legal services staff feel that they are a part of the community. A representative of the legal project attends UCAM staff meetings and the entire staff the legal project was involved in UCAM's long range planning process. Legal services staff are always included in staff lunches and other special events hosted by UCAM. This has allowed the staff members to become acquainted on a personal level and to develop relationships that encourage collaboration and promote the understanding of issues facing each agency.

A final factor in the success of this project has been the development of a sense of ownership by community members. When volunteers have been needed to assist with various activities, community members have volunteered immediately. Many of the volunteers have expressed a desire to give back to the community in return for the services they received.

There have been many rewards in working with the Cambodian refugee and immigrant community. Although the project initially served only Cambodians, the project now has clients from more than sixty countries. As the Cambodian refugees began to adjust to life in the United States, they began to find employment or enroll in English classes. They came in contact with refugees from many other countries and began to make referrals to our services. From these referrals we now have expanded services to all refugee and immigrant groups.

When the project began, one of the goals was to provide improved access to legal services for the Cambodian community. An idea for accomplishing this goal was to have one of the Cambodian staff members attend law school. This goal was reached when one of the project

paralegals graduated from law school and is now working for SMRLS as a staff attorney.

Another reward has been that the project has been able to identify the changing needs of the community and to secure funding to meet this needs. 1996 brought many changes to the welfare system, including the possible loss of Supplemental Security Income benefits and Food Stamps for noncitizens. Members of the Cambodian elders group met weekly at UCAM but most of them had never considered that they might be able to pass the citizenship test. UCAM and SMRLS worked with the Minnesota Literacy Council to begin classes and the agencies worked together to encourage elders to attend English classes. In a very short period of time, eight elders had become naturalized citizens and they actively recruited their friends to come to class. The citizenship classes have continued to grow and now include immigrants from many ethnic groups. UCAM has made arrangements with the Red Cross to provide transportation to the students and the legal staff is available during class time to work on citizenship applications and other legal issues the students are facing.

After the legal project had been in existence for several years, a need arose for a special project to assist a small group of Cambodians in applying for political asylum. These clients were not eligible for legal services because of their immigration status. UCAM used the existing project as a model and established a partnership with a legal aid program that had no restrictions on the clients served. An attorney and paralegal/interpreter were hired to work on the new project and were housed in UCAM office space. The project was time limited but was very successful in the delivery of services. It became another example of how legal services and a community based organization could form a partnership and work together for the benefit of the clients.

When additional funding was received for citizenship work, the project was able to expand its services to Rochester, a community about 70 miles south of St. Paul that has one of the largest concentrations of Somali refugees in the United States. In addition, the community has significant numbers of refugees from Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Sudan, Bosnia and other eastern European countries. In setting up this new project, an arrangement similar to that with UCAM was worked out. In Rochester, the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association (IMAA) is recognized as the primary agency that serves refugees and immigrants. IMAA has staff from seven countries and these staff members are available to interpret for clients. New refugees are assigned by the welfare department to IMAA for employment and resettlement services. The staff members bring clients to our paralegal for help with everything from obtaining social security cards to becoming naturalized American citizens. With the assistance of IMAA staff, newly arriving refugees are made aware of our services within days of their arrival in the United States.

A final reward is knowing that the project is working well and that the clients appreciate the services. Frequently clients tell the staff they were referred by family members or friends who were clients of the project. Cambodian refugees from around the country have called with questions and often mention the wish that they had similar services in their area.

As the project has grown, it has been a challenge to meet the needs of new groups of refugees who require legal services. It is necessary to develop relationships with the leadership of refugee organizations and to form partnerships in order to effectively deliver bilingual/bicultural services to changing refugee populations.

As trust in the project grew, clients came to have very high expectations of the legal services staff. There seems to be a sense in the community that SMRLS can handle any type of case or resolve any legal issue. It is hard for community members to understand that there are income limitations and restrictions on services. It is often challenging and time consuming to explain to Cambodian clients why we can not accept their cases.

The Cambodian staff members have a very difficult time keeping their personal lives and their jobs separate. They are a part of the community they are serving and frequently encounter clients at social events, family gatherings or in other public places. They are barraged with questions about individual cases, changes in the law, the political situation in Cambodia and other concerns facing the clients. The Cambodian staff members have to learn to set boundaries and to leave time for their personal lives. In doing this, management has to also recognize the problem and provide various kinds of support. Clear case acceptance guidelines have to be established so the Cambodian staff can say to the client “I am not allowed to do that” or “My supervisor won’t give me permission to work on this case.” This allows the staff member to save face within the community without offending the client.

The relationship with the United Cambodian Association is SMRLS’ longest and most productive partnership but many other community collaborations have also been successful. SMRLS is working with Ahn Da Yung on issues involving Native American youth. With the Thomas-Dale Initiative there is a focus on community building. A new partnership is being formed with the Community Agency for Refugees in Mankato. For many years SMRLS worked with the Neighborhood House to deliver services to the Hispanic community in Minnesota.

From the record it is clear that partnerships between Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services and client communities have enhanced the delivery of services and improved access for low-income clients.